

Authority: Abuse and Limits

It seems necessary to examine and condemn another sacred cow. This will be done with the full realization that it may hazard the good will of some of my dear friends; for this particular axiom is revered, not by modern liberals or the traditional establishment, but by Christian conservatives, those who hold the Bible in highest regard. I propose to tamper with Authoritarianism, the Biblical truth that God has absolute authority in the universe and that He executes this authority by vesting it in men in a somewhat similar absolute sense. The first part of this proposition is unassailable. I have no quarrel with that. It is the second part, the idea of absolute authority in men, that I wish to put in a clearer perspective. Then I wish to apply whatever sound ideas we may glean from this study to the husband-wife relationship in particular, for that is the crucial issue that is on my heart at this time.

The Biblical evidence for absolute authority of the husband over the wife is, to say the least, formidable: Genesis 3:16, "*thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee*"; 1 Corinthians 11:3, "*But I would have you now, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God*" (if absolute authority is not stated here, then the man-woman relationship is the only link of this three-link chain that is not absolute); Ephesians 5:22-23, "*Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.*" (Absolute authority is certainly implied here, since wives are to submit to their husbands as unto the Lord, and since the husband's headship is said to be as Christ's headship over the church.) Colossians 3:18, "*Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.*"; 1 Peter 3:1, "*Likewise ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives.*" (This particular verse gains significance by the "likewise" which refers back to the foregoing chapter 2, verse 18, "*not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward*").

I do not propose to set aside these Biblical injunctions, but to make our inquiry with them in focus.

Now, let us take the case for absolute, unqualified obedience. First, no exceptions are allowed so far as these direct statements are made. The woman is not told that she should submit to every command that does not require her to sin, in which case she should decline and refuse to obey. If this absolute interpretation is applied, then we have wives compelled to be a party to, or outright engage in, such things as adultery, prostitution, sodomy, incest, rape, lying theft, murder, sadism, brutality, mental and physical torture and a thousand other acts of wickedness. Now someone is going to say that this is only hypothetical. Thirty years ago, I said exactly that . . . that God would protect a woman who submitted, and that she would not have to be subjected to such. But now I know different. These things can and do happen all the time. There are those who point to Sarah's submission to Abraham, even to the point of joining another man's harem, and to God's subsequent deliverance. To say that God blesses such cowardice and devious lying on the part of both Abraham and Sarah, is to do violence to the whole Bible, which enjoins upright conduct on the part of God's people. For women to obey their husbands as Sarah did Abraham, "calling him lord" (1 Peter 3:6), does not hold up the example of lying and fornication. God's deliverance was in spite of their sin, not because of it. Their sinful acts were recorded as an example of their unbelief in the face of God's immutable promise, and of God's faithfulness to perform His purpose in spite of man's weakness.

But the case for absolute, unqualified obedience burdens, not only the husband and wife relationship, but a host of other authority areas as well. There is the citizen-to-state relationship: "*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.*" (Romans 13:1). Also Titus 3:1. 1 Peter 2:13 says, "*Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake.*" This certainly sounds like absolute language. There is the employer-to-employee relationship: "*Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh.*" (Ephesians 6:5, also Colossians 3:22 and 1 Peter 2:18). None of these passages exempt sinful acts, but, as they stand alone, require unqualified obedience. Then there is the Christian's relationship to his elder or pastor. "*Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, saying, The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All things therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do.*" "All things" certainly sounds like unqualified obedience, even to those to whom the Lord later refers as hypocrites, blind guides, fools, whited graves, serpents and generations of vipers!! It may be argued that even though this is our Lord's admonition to His disciples, it belongs to another "dispensation". Yet is not this the same principle certainly carried over into the New Testament church by Hebrews 13:17, "*Obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves*"?

Absolute unqualified obedience in the above areas may, will, and actually does require citizens to worship the Christian God, to assemble together, to publish and distribute Bibles and Christian literature, to teach and preach the truth of the living God. Man-made laws and ordinances also require idol worship, observation of heathen rituals, the murder of infants, and at times, whole races of people. One does not have to look too far into this political world, to see all kinds of abuses of this power which will demand every horrendous and unthinkable thing imaginable to the sensitive Christian. Nor will one look very far into the industrial and business world before he finds cheating, lying, stealing, drunkenness, immorality, extortion and murder required of employees by employers. And to establish absolute unqualified obedience of Christians to elders is to re-establish the abolished priestly order, to entrench popery, to abolish the competence of every believer before God through the one mediator Jesus Christ. It is to fly in the face of so much Bible truth as to make the whole of the New Covenant meaningless.

So we must here and now either endorse all this wickedness as intended and enjoined by God in strict observance of absolute, unqualified obedience to existing authority, or we must admit that *no* human authority is intended to be absolute and unqualified. I personally know of no Christian who will embrace the former. That leaves us shut up to the latter. But let us be reminded that once we

have abandoned the former we are done with it. We may not run back and argue absolute subjection just when a situation suits our fancy.

But we do have a right to choose either the former or latter, simply because one is abhorrent to us and the other is not? Absolutely not! If the Biblical evidence supports absolute obedience to human authority, we may not oppose it, irrespective of how distasteful it may be to our person. If we are to reject it, we must reject it on strictly Biblical grounds, not personal tastes or on the grounds of human good or ill.

But on what Biblical grounds may we reject it? The precepts we read are absolute and unqualified. They give no grounds. We do have other precepts which forbid idolatry, lying, murder, theft, adultery and covetousness. Unless we are to accept these as contradictory and charge the word of God with inconsistency, we must find our answer in Biblical precedent as well as precept. Precedent will interpret precept, and as such, will carry the full force of the precept. In order to do this, we must recognize the unity of the Covenant of Works, commonly called the Old Testament, and the Covenant of Grace, commonly called the New Testament. The God of one is the same God of the other. Truth is unchanged. The gospel, as well as the law, is the expression of the immutable mind of the Eternal God. We have allegory, narrative, symbolism, rituals in the history of the Old Testament which are portions of truth made perfect in the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; Hebrews 4:11, 8:5). In addition, we will find plenty of examples in the New Testament and in church history. The evidence in church history, of course, will not have the force of Biblical precedent, but is valuable for corroborative purposes when they are in accord with similar Biblical events.

The Bible is replete with examples of God's people disobeying human government in order to comply with divine government. When Pharaoh commanded that all male Hebrew infants be killed, Exodus 1:17 tells us that "*the midwives feared God and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive*". They then deceived the king about the circumstances, falsely reporting that the male children were born before they arrived. Far from being displeased with this disobedience and deception, the Bible tells us, "*Therefore God dealt well with the midwives: and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty. And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that he made them houses.*" Amazing! God counts their disobedience to human government because of their fear of Him an act of faith! The same is said of Moses' parents: "*By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child: and they were not afraid of the king's commandment*" (Hebrews 11:23).

Rahab's treachery against the government of Jericho is counted and commended as faith. "*By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace*" (Hebrews 11:31).

One of the mightiest miracles in the Bible was worked by God confirming His approval of a man who defied a wicked queen. Four hundred of Jezebel's obedient and faithful prophets of Baal were impotent against God's one Elijah who feared God more than human government (1 Kings 18).

The Bible is not wanting in examples of those who have been compelled by their faith to disobey ecclesiastical authority. When Peter and John were commanded to not speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus (by those who sat in Moses' seat) they answered, "*Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard*". Paul also ran afoul of these would-be authorities almost everywhere he went. And had he hearkened unto them rather than Christ, no churches would have been planted. When these Judaistic Christian authorities demanded the circumcision of Titus, he "*gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you*" (Galatians 2:5).

Let us consider the summary in Hebrews 11:35-39: "*And others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment; They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy): they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith . . .*". And why were these so ill treated? Because they feared God more than human government, ecclesiastical authorities or employer. They gladly suffered loss of necessities, station and life itself rather than betray their faith. They loved God supremely, even to the loss of all else.

Now, add to that the awful persecutions suffered by the early church at the hand of the Roman government. Why? Because they refused to renounce Christ and worship the heathen deities established by the state. And when the Roman government proclaimed Christianity the state religion, true Christians recognized the counterfeit and stayed underground. Fox's Book of Martyrs records the atrocities perpetuated on true believers through the centuries for nothing less than obeying Christ rather than civil and ecclesiastical authority. The eighteenth century revivals saw the Holy Spirit employ men who feared not to preach the true gospel in defiance of established ecclesiastical authority.

Make no mistake about it. The governments of this world, the economies of this world, and the established religions of this world are too hostile to God to establish rules and laws that the Christian will not, at times be compelled to break. That is where much of our warfare and nearly all of our persecution will come from.

But where do we find the Biblical example of God's commendation of a wife's disobedience to her husband? This may be some difficulty. The one classic example is that of Nabal and Abigail (1 Samuel 25). This one is not too satisfactory since Nabal did not actually forbid Abigail from ministering to David and his men. But this is begging the question: She knew quite well that what she was doing was contrary to Nabal's well-expressed wishes. Also, God does not actually commend her in word, unless we take David's words of praise to be directly inspired of God. It does seem, however, that the good purpose of God was served by this woman's wise act, rather than by her sitting in passive submission while her husband's foolishness brought destruction on himself and his whole household. It is quite likely that the wisdom of Abigail has been called upon many times previously to offset the foolishness of Nabal. Fools, unaided, seldom become wealthy.

The Bible fails to give us much testimony of the disobedience of wives, God-commended or not; Abigail and Vashti (Esther 1) being the only ones. We do know quite well, however, that wives were disobedient then as well as now. Otherwise, there would be no need for the New Testament to command their obedience at least three times. I think the reason for this is that the Bible is primarily concerned with the relationship of men with God rather than a handbook on family relationships, as a host of quasi-Christian-psychologist-preachers would have us believe.

I think, however, that the precedents supplied are sufficient for us to establish some principles that mitigate submission to all human authority in whatever sphere it occurs.

1. **When a choice must be made between a command of man and a direct command of God.** Peter stated it well: *"Wheter it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than God, judge ye"* (Acts 4:19). And again, *"We ought to obey God rather than man"* (Acts 5:29). Thus the Hebrew midwives were more obliged to God's laws regarding preservation of life than they were to a wicked king's decree. And God's people must disobey their governments when such require worship of other than the true God. And when elders enjoin us into anti-Christian, worldly religious activities, we may rightly disobey in order to worship God in spirit and in truth. And any command a Christian woman receives from her husband that requires her to engage in any sinful activity may be resisted. That is the most obvious and easiest principal to identify. The others may not be so clear. But there *are* others.
2. **When wisdom dictates a greater evil is to be avoided.** This is what applied in the case of Nabal and Abigail. It also applied in the case of Rahab's hiding and delivering the Hebrew spies from the authorities in Jericho. In neither case could the women have been charged with sin or disobedience to God by acting other than they did. They could have done nothing and let things take their course. But in both cases these women had spiritual insight enough to know what God was doing and chose to work for His revealed purpose rather than obey human authority. This principle can be applied when a woman finds herself commanded to keep silent about some particular wickedness her husband may be practicing in the home. Brutal beating of children, sexual molestation of children, sometimes outright rape or continual incest of daughters and step-daughters are often kept under cover because a wife has been intimidated by her husband's "authority". This sort of thing goes on all the time, and it has been actually encouraged by well-meaning but defective teachings on home authority. The wife is told she must obey the husband unless he commands her to commit some positive sin. Her silence is not viewed as sin. So her husband's sin and the wickedness and abuse continue. Sometimes physical, verbal and psychological abuse of the woman by her husband continues until she is virtually destroyed because she feels enjoined by the word of God to silently submit. I know of at least one case where this resulted in the poor woman's suicide. It may be rightly said here that such an abused wife may find resources in Christ to endure and survive such abuse. Indeed, there have been multitudes who have. But if a woman does not have the spiritual maturity and constitution to endure, she will go under unless she has other recourse.
3. **When disobedience will serve a greater evangelical purpose.** Let me say at the outset here, that I am not suggesting that a woman rebel against her husband to scratch some religious itch she may have. She may not use this as an excuse to abandon her wifely and motherly responsibilities in the home to chase around after some "extracurricular" church activities, i.e., women's auxiliaries, visitation, soul-winning, or social services. God has not so called her to sch rebellion. I am, rather, referring to what seems to be the right and responsibility of every Christian when it comes to correction of an erring brother, or, at least one who is called a brother. Two scripture passages are in view here. The first is Matthew 18:15-17: *"Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."* The second is in 1 Corinthians 5:11: *"But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no, not to eat."* These passages can apply, of course, only if both husband and wife profess Christianity. Is not such a wife's husband also her brother? Is she, by virtue of her sex or her marriage excepted from the responsibility of exercising or even initiating church discipline? If so, by what authority in the word of God? We are told in Galatians 3:28: *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."* We do know that women are restricted from exercising authority over men, especially in the matter of teaching. But so far as their spiritual position and privileges in Christ, they are not one whit below men. They cannot be exempted from participation in church discipline on the basis of being second-class Christians. Evangelical responsibilities hang just as heavily upon them to correct an erring brother as it does others. What? Must she cover and excuse her husband's sin because he so commands her, and so become a party to his continued spiritual decline? Is it men only who are to *"have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them"* (Ephesians 5:11)? Is an obedient wife, therefore, compelled to walk and fellowship with this darkness to keep from violating the "king in his castle", to avoid embarrassing and humiliating her "lord"? I think not. A woman's redemptive responsibility for her husband exceeds her marital responsibility. And Thousands of men owe no little part of their spiritual growth to the faithfulness of wives who loved them enough to blow the whistle on them.

But now it is objected, strict observance of this sort of church discipline would bar the wife from social fellowship with her husband. Exactly! And what more powerful inducement might a man have to mend his ways? He might survive the loss of the church's fellowship if he is a carnal man, but hardly his wife's! This brings up another possibility and objection. This sort of thing might lead to the physical separation of the husband and wife, especially if the man proves to be not a Christian as he had professed. That is indeed a possibility. And if so, it can be resolved in at least two ways. If the man proves himself not to be a

Christian and is willing to reconcile with his wife, unchanged, the marriage may be restored as a mixed one. But the pretense of Christianity on his part has been demolished. Henceforth he is dealt with as one who needs to be saved. The other very real possibility is that this confrontation will lead to the man's conversion. I know of a number of cases where this has actually happened. This is not a violation of 1 Peter 3:1-2. Silent subjection "without the word" is not the "how to win your husband" passage. It *may* be done in this manner. The wife is not compelled to "preach" to her husband, or to engage him in theological wrangles. Her chaste behaviour may work powerfully toward his conversion, but when he is converted, it will not be apart from the word of God.

4. There is at least one other principle where a wife is justified in disobedience, but it is one where extreme caution is to be exercised. That is when the lawful relationship of husband and wife is violated.

One might object to applying examples of disobedience in other areas of human authority to that of husband and wife, on the grounds that the husband and wife relationship is somewhat unique, in that theirs is an organic bond of love and oneness that does not exist in the others. Also, theirs is given as a type of Christ and His church. This does, indeed, make the husband and wife relationship unique, but I do not think it can be demonstrated that it makes a better case for absolute, unqualified obedience. If anything, it is the other way around. Every case where the wife's subjection is enjoined, the husband's benevolence and responsibility is likewise required. When the husband is compared to Christ, it is as the "saviour of the body (Ephesians 5:23). When a so-called marriage bears not the slightest resemblance to Christ and the church, I suggest that the force of this submissive injunction is greatly weakened. I know of cases, for instance, when the wife is compelled to engage in sodomy, when she is repeatedly raped, where (after 20 years) the marriage has never been sexually consummated, the husband sleeping with a dog between him and his wife, where the husband brings his mistresses into his home and requires his wife to wait on them. These, granted, are "sick" cases, but they are by no means unreal or scarce.

The idea that a wife is the husband's chattel to do with as he pleases is not Biblical. "*They shall be one flesh (Genesis 2:24). 'The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife' (1 Corinthians 7:4).* It seems, then, that the wife has as much right over her husband's body as he has over hers. And *that the marriage* gives him no more demand over his wife's body than *he is willing to yield his body to her.* He who, therefore, refuses to be the saviour of his wife's body has, to that extent forfeited his scriptural expectation of submission.

In conclusion, I realize that much of what has been said here is going to be received with great consternation by some of my evangelical brethren. It is also going to be read superficially with great delight by some rebellious women who are looking for a flimsy excuse to throw off the marriage yoke and rebel against God-ordained authority. When bread is offered to children, one cannot keep the dogs from grabbing some of it that was not meant for them. Nevertheless, the children will be fed, and that is what matters. The Bible no more teaches submission at any cost, than it teaches peace at any cost, or unity at any cost, or accepting professors of Christianity at any cost.

There are a few cautions I would like to impress upon the minds of wives who may be contemplating disobedience. Make certain your grounds are solidly scriptural and that your motives are pure; that your actions do not arise out of intolerance, hatred, revenge, rebellion, worldliness, a desire to get out of your marriage. Your objective must be solidly redemptive, the restoration or salvation of your husband, the preservation of life, body and sanity. And you must make certain that you are always ready to forgive, restore and submit to a loving husband.

- C. M.